

# David's Emotional Breakdown: When Overwhelmed David Fled to the Lord I Samuel 21:13-15/Psalm 34

We have all heard of people who have gone through complete emotional or mental breakdowns, but few of us have ever actually witnessed one as it happened. The good news is that God recorded the "before, during, and after" of the emotional and physical breakdown David experienced.

This sad but instructive event is captured flawlessly and in amazing detail. As we open to I Samuel 21:13 David hit the bottom, overwhelmed by life, sinking into fear, and trapped by his choices, he melts down.

This may be the single most humiliating and desperate moment of David's life. Follow along with me as we see what happens when even great servants of the Lord get overwhelmed by their trouble and trials.

*So he changed his behavior before them, pretended madness in their hands, scratched on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva fall down on his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, "Look, you see the man is insane. Why have you brought him to me? Have I need of madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?" (1 Samuel 21:13-15).*

When life unexpectedly overwhelms us and we feel we can't go on and we feel all alone—what do we do? David faced that as well as so many of God's faithful servants through the years. Just because we love and serve the Lord doesn't mean we miss the storms and skids of life. God's Word tells us that:

## David Bottomed Out In His Life

Remember the context of these gravest hours in the life of David? Look back a few verses to v. 10.

*1 Samuel 21:10-13 Then David arose and fled that day from before Saul, and went to Achish the king of Gath. 11 And the servants of Achish said to him, "Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of him to one another in dances, saying: 'Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands?'" 12 Now David took these words to heart, and was very much afraid of Achish the king of*

*Gath. [that is the setting for Psalm 56] 13 So he changed his behavior before them, pretended madness in their hands, scratched on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva fall down on his beard. [that is the setting for Psalm 34 and then later, Psalm 70].*

David bottoms out emotionally and is unable to go on because of complete fear, loneliness, and danger. So he puts on an act like he has lost his mind.

Not everything David did was right—but the inspired lessons are always right. The key to this time in David's life is found not in the short term events, but in the long term direction of his heart!

But now as we turn to Psalm 34, look at this incredible note from God. This is the God of the second chance and new beginnings. This is the God of ALL comfort.

**David was all alone.** No army (they start joining him according to I Samuel 22 after Gath), no family, no friends, nothing.

**David was desperate.**

**David was afraid.** Psalm 56 that we looked at last time was written during this event. Psalm 34 was written after this event, as David had a meltdown, and fled to the cave. There all alone, David turned the cave into a cathedral as he worshiped the Lord.

Here is one of the most fascinating lessons in all of God's Word, as we read that:

## **Psalm 34's Setting is Fear**

A Psalm of David when he pretended madness before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he departed.<sup>1</sup>

Remember what we are looking at, it is a Psalm. A what? **A Psalm** is a song of worship directed to God. After dread fear, pretended madness and all, David fled physically to a cave, but more than that, he fled spiritually to God's Throne.

David had found a place he could always reach for safety and security—in any situation. The Lord was his refuge; the Lord is our refuge also. Christ our refuge is the safest spot in the Universe. He is the place we go when life gets tough.

David in the Old Testament has a twin in the New Testament. God uses a word for these two that He does not use for anyone else in His word. They are special servants. Look with me at Paul's take on events like David went through in Philippians 4:6.

The Apostle Paul had this to say about not giving into fear:

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<sup>1</sup> Abimelech, like Pharaoh, was a dynastic designation not a proper name. (*The MacArthur Study Bible*, p. 771.)  
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***Be anxious for nothing***, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6).

The literal construction of that verse is a beautiful imperative, which says this:

***Nothing will I be anxious about; I will worry about nothing; I will pray about everything.***

That is the tremendous lesson David learned during these very hard times in his life.

Remember this about David: not everything he did was right—but the inspired lessons God gave us through his example are always right. What really counted was not what happened in David's short-term events, but in the long-term direction of his heart.

## **The Pattern of Faith over Fear**

David turned, trusted, and triumphed—that is his life long pattern. Whether it was the family conflicts and dangers that left him all alone, or this job loss—he always turned to God, trusts in His promises, and is led in triumph. That kind of echoes a New Testament verse we all know doesn't it? Remember what Paul said during similar hard times in his life?

*2 Corinthians 2:14 Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.*

In each place of our lives that we face the testing fires of affliction: what fragrance do we offer to God?

- Are you a fragrance at the doctor's office or the unemployment office for Christ or not for Christ?
- Can people tell you are turning to God or to despair?
- Can your friends see that you are trusting God, or panicking?
- Does God see you being led in triumph or sinking in pity?

Remember we can't change most of our circumstances—but we can change our attitude as we go through them!

Even the Apostle Paul could identify with the intensity of David's struggles as the unexpected twists of life threatened to overwhelm him:

*For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life (2 Corinthians 1:8).*

*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.<sup>8</sup> We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;<sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—<sup>10</sup> always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body (2 Corinthians 4:7-10).*

Both David and Paul found a place they could always flee to for safety and security; the Lord was their refuge, and He is ours as well. Christ is the safest spot in the universe. To glorify God in trials, He is the place to go when life gets tough.

Let's now turn our attention to the rest of Psalm 34, written after David escaped from Gath, and made it to the cave of Adullam. Remember: the details of 1 Samuel 21:13-15 are the backdrop for this psalm.<sup>2</sup>

David turned what could have been a cave of fear into what became a cathedral of praise and worship. This song expresses how David had felt in the courts of the great warlord of the Philistines. Even though David melted down out of fear before Achish, he recovers as soon as he turned to God who was watching. God gave David the grace he needed in time of need and will do the same each time we call out to Him. Please stand with me as we listen to:

## **Psalm 34: Turning Fear into Worship**

*I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. 2 My soul shall make its boast in the LORD; The humble shall hear of it and be glad. 3 Oh, magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together. 4 I sought the LORD, and He heard me, And delivered me from all my fears. 5 They looked to Him and were radiant, And their faces were not ashamed. 6 This poor man cried out, and the LORD heard him, And saved him out of all his troubles. 7 The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, And delivers them. 8 Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him! 9 Oh, fear the LORD, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him. 10 The young lions lack and suffer hunger; But those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing. 11 Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. 12 Who is the man who desires life, And loves many days, that he may see good? 13 Keep your tongue from evil, And your lips from speaking deceit. 14 Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it. 15 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their cry. 16 The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, To cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. 17 The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. 18 The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. 19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all. 20 He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken. 21 Evil shall slay the wicked, And those who hate the righteous shall be*

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<sup>2</sup> I recommend noting 1 Samuel 21:13-15 by Psalm 34 in your Bible, and Psalm 34 by 1 Samuel 21:13-15.  
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*condemned. 22 The LORD redeems the soul of His servants, And none of those who trust in Him shall be condemned.*

## **Pray**

Now walk with me through the highlights of this Psalm:

### **Psalm 34:1-2—**

#### **David delighted in the Lord:**

*I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. <sup>2</sup> My soul shall make its boast in the LORD; the humble shall hear of it and be glad.*

This was not prideful boasting on David's part because the Lord was the object of his boasting. God says: "*He who glories, let him glory in the LORD*" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

### **Psalm 34:3—**

#### **David gave glory to God:**

*Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His name together.*

How can we exalt the Lord together? By acknowledging that He is watching over us just as He did with David.

### **Psalm 34:4-5—**

#### **David sought God in fearful times:**

*I sought the LORD, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. <sup>5</sup> They looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces were not ashamed.*

David consistently sought God in his troubles. And when he asked something of the Lord, he waited expectantly for His answer. Waiting on God is like an echo: you can't hear an echo unless you wait around to listen for it—and that's how prayer is. God always answers our prayers: He may answer with a silent "Wait"; He may answer with "No"; or He may answer with "Yes." But we can be confident that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us, and will grant our petitions. (See 1 John 5:14.)

David still had to go through all this unexpected twist entailed, but he went through it *with* God, who delivered him out of it all.

### **Psalm 34:6-7—**

#### **David had a proper view of himself during tough times:**

*This poor man cried out, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. <sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.*

There is no limit to what the Lord can do with a needy person who has cried out to Him. For God has promised: *Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up* (James 4:10)!

Jesus said that the point of entry into His family starts with humble contrition and repentance, as He said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit*" (Matthew 5:3). That is the same idea here; David had a proper view of himself. When this "*poor man cried out,*" the Lord heard and saved him!

Do you see how he keeps putting the emphasis on magnifying the Lord? He took the focus off of himself, his fears, and his troubles, and looked up to exalt the Lord!

Dwelling on our problems, rather than the One in control who can deliver us, leads to defeat.

If in humility we approach God in our need, He will strengthen us, for the Angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him to rescue them.

### **Psalm 34:8—**

#### **David personally experienced God:**

*Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!*

David said, "Lord, because You are watching, I'm going to tell people that they should taste and see that You're good. I've experienced that and want them to also." Since God is always watching us, when we need a refuge, a Refuge can be found!

### **Psalm 34:9-14—**

#### **David practiced the presence of God:**

*Oh, fear the LORD, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him. <sup>10</sup> The young lions lack and suffer hunger; but those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing. <sup>11</sup> Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. <sup>12</sup> Who is the man who desires life, and loves many days, that he may see good? <sup>13</sup> Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. <sup>14</sup> Depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*

David practiced the presence of God—acknowledging Him is to fear him. His changed behavior follows this principle: if we believe right, we will behave right.

### **Psalm 34:15-21—**

#### **David knew he was in touch with God during the dangerous times:**

*The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry. <sup>16</sup> The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. <sup>17</sup> The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. <sup>18</sup> The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit. <sup>19</sup> Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. <sup>20</sup> He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken. <sup>21</sup> Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous shall be condemned.*

Sometimes we may act like Elisha's terrified servant whose focus was on the enemy troops around Dothan instead of God (2 Kings 6). But then Elisha said,

“Lord, open his eyes so he can see the real picture!” And the servant could actually see the glorious armies of the Lord encamped all around them! That’s what David was seeing when he said: *The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous*. So he again rejoiced because he was in touch with the living God!

Not only does God watch over us, but He also listens to us. David testified that ... *His ears are open to [our] cry*. As it says in Romans 8:31: *If God is for us, who can be against us?* That’s why the Lord said, *“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay”* (Romans 12:19).

We should never follow the world’s motto: Don’t get mad—get even! We should never try to get even, or go after anyone, or protract the agony in any way. God will recompense—God will vindicate. For His face is against evildoers to the extent that He will *“cut off the remembrance of them from the earth”* (Psalm 34:16).

### **Psalm 34:22—**

#### **David made the cross his ultimate refuge in hard times:**

*The LORD redeems the soul of His servants, and none of those who trust in Him shall be condemned.*

This whole Psalm was a vivid testimony that through this great time of distress God was very much a part of everything David did. Out of this terrifying time of fleeing to Gath and acting crazy before a Philistine warlord, David acknowledged: “I will magnify the Lord because He is my Refuge—the only safe place to be.”

## **Turning to God In Hard Times**

Because David’s life was carved into the bedrock of God’s Word, we know he habitually turned to the Lord in his lonely trials. But what happens if a person doesn’t have the Lord to turn to?

A classic example of being all alone and without the Lord is found in the life of William Cowper who was orphaned at age six. He was from a famous British family; his grand uncle was the prime minister of Britain in its greatest hour. Because his family was well off, William was sent off to a boarding school. However, being a small, young, and weak boy, he was mercilessly hounded and preyed upon by older boys. Bullied to the point of depression, he grew up always laboring under the dark shadows of life.

Having not had a personal relationship with the Lord in his youth, as David did, William attempted to hang himself. He failed, and then lost his mind over the guilt of thinking he had committed the unpardonable sin. Consequently, he ended up spending many years in an insane asylum.

But in 1764, at age 33, our merciful God drew William Cowper to Christ, and he called upon the Lord for salvation. Soon afterward he was taken in by John Newton and they became best friends for life. Even though William struggled with crippling depression

until he died, it never stopped him from writing hymns. He became one of the most well-known hymn writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, his best known hymn is still in our books and is number 196. As you turn there, remember that even though he couldn't often "feel" God near, by faith William Cowper:

## **Choose to Follow God in Triumph**

Before we sing this hymn, from now on, when you hear these familiar words: think about William Cowper, alone, overwhelmed, despairing, hopeless except for Christ. This hymn was his cry of faith to the One who alone could help him:

### **There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood**

There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;  
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see  
That fountain in his day;  
And there may I, though sinful, too,  
Wash all my sins away.

Dear dying Lamb,  
Thy precious blood  
Shall never lose its power,  
'Til all the ransomed Church of God  
Be saved, to sin no more.

And since, by faith, I saw the stream  
Thy flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
And shall be 'til I die. Amen.

David chose to trust God's promises and be led in triumph!

Remember: life is full of unexpected twists—those sudden changes you never see coming.

When we are desperate, God is not.

When we are alone, God is there.

When we are troubled, God is a very present refuge and help for you to flee into His loving and waiting arms!